

SERMON TITLE: "Awesome God of Assurance"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 8:28-36
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 27, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Many of you have asked me about my vacation. Since it fits well with today's scripture reading of the Transfiguration story, I'm going to tell you about it. To get to our destination, Steve and I drove through southern Idaho and across the middle of Oregon. Heading west on US Highway 20, we drove from Ontario, Oregon, through Burns. As we drew nearer to the city of Bend, we could see the Three Sisters mountains poking up above the horizon. All three of the Sisters are above 10,000 feet. We could also see the tall peaks of Mt. Washington, Mt. Bachelor, and Three-Fingered Jack—all in the Cascade Mountain Range. On that day, those snow-capped peaks shone brilliantly against the blue-sky background and fed our hunger for the visual beauty of God's glorious creation.

When we reached Eugene and headed south to Roseburg on Interstate 5, we could see that we had entered a new season. On the west side of the Cascades, spring was coming fast. The hillsides were covered in lush green grass. About half of the deciduous trees and bushes had already leafed out. Over the next several days, we noticed many trees in blossom. And, in small flower beds, and in big fields next to grazing sheep, we saw bright yellow daffodils showing off their splendor. Of course, being near the coast, there was also some fog. When we visited Bandon, Coos Bay, and Reedsport, a cold and rainy front had moved in, so instead of walking on the beach, we found some strategic spots where we could enjoy watching the crashing waves from the comfort of our parked car.

Our trip to western Oregon also included some important visits with Steve's mother and Steve's two brothers and their wives. All of that went well.

Coming back home, we followed a storm that had hit the Cascades and left several feet of new snow. Fortunately, the plows and sand trucks had been out. It was slow going, but no new snow was

falling. The blur of a constantly-mud-splattered windshield and the dazzling brightness of the snowy landscape made vision a little challenging sometimes. We were constantly taking our sunglasses on and off because the skies were alternately mixed with sunshine and clouds. When we got back into Utah, we felt the relief of dry and clear roads and the assurance that we were almost home.

So, yes, we had a nice week away. It gave me a lot of opportunity to reflect on our “Awesome God” theme that we have been focusing on this month and, specifically, on the Transfiguration story from Luke 9. With images of dazzling, snowy mountains and foggy, cloudy uncertainties, I invite you to experience with me our awesome God of assurance.

1—DAZZLING GLORY

Let’s begin with the dazzling glory. This story is called the Transfiguration because of what the disciples saw that day that they went up on the mountain with Jesus. Peter, John, and James had gone up there with Jesus to pray. While Jesus was praying, however, something unusual happened. The disciples saw that the appearance of Jesus’ face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Right before their eyes, Jesus was transfigured. And then, out of nowhere, the disciples saw Moses and Elijah appear in glory. Representing the Jewish law and the prophets, those two prominent leaders had come to speak with Jesus about what lay ahead of him in Jerusalem.

There’s a lot about this experience that seems strange, but let’s hold that for later. Right now, let’s stick with the dazzling glory. Today we have the privilege of knowing the big story of Jesus: his ministry, death on the cross, resurrection, his ascension, and even 2000 years of powerful salvation in our world. Christians today believe that Jesus is united in the awesomeness of God. But Peter, John, and James were still figuring things out. At this point in Luke 9, Jesus was still mostly their teacher, who also worked some miracles. But when the disciples saw Jesus’ appearance change into dazzling brightness and Moses appear, they recognized the parallels between Jesus and that great leader of the Hebrew people. Moses also had gone up on a mountain and had encountered the brightness of God.

Just as Moses had received the law from God, so would Jesus' teachings become God's word to his people. Both Moses and Jesus were transfigured and empowered by the awesome and dazzling glory of God.

The parallels with Elijah were significant too. You remember that Elijah had called down God's fire from heaven and won the contest against the prophets of Baal. After that, Elijah had encountered God on the mountain. God wasn't in the wind or the fire, but in the still, small voice in the silence. In Luke 9, the name of Elijah appears three times, and the Gospel writer indicates several other parallels between Jesus and Elijah. Just as God's prophet Elijah went up against King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, so was Jesus preparing to go up against the powers in Jerusalem. The awesomeness of God that was evident in Elijah was also being revealed in Jesus. It was apparent in this dazzling glory.

2—SLEEPY CLOUDS

But too much dazzling glory can also be blinding. Maybe that's why God's awesomeness always seems to provide some sleepy clouds, as well. It's interesting that Luke 9:32 tells us that the disciples were weighed down by sleep, even as they were awake enough to see the glory. Verse 34 tells us that, even as they were seeing this bright revelation, "a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud."

On a bright day, sometimes a little shade can help—whether that comes from sunglasses, a hat brim, a car visor, or a cloud. But too much cloudiness, like an Oregon coast fog or a windshield constantly splattered with snowy mud, can make it hard to ascertain what's ahead. Too much sleepiness can cause confusion and uncertainty. It can be terrifying.

In scripture, clouds and sleepiness are often signs of mystery. They are a reminder of our human limitations. We are not all powerful. We are not God. There's a whole lot that we don't know and understand. Ironically, the more we learn about anything, the more we realize how much more there is that we still don't know. And yet, hidden in those clouds and those dreamlike states, are

important truths and divine realities. This Transfiguration story is like the literary genre known as magical realism. When long-dead Moses and Elijah appear, you know there's a deeper meaning. The story is signaling a word to the wise for us. In the sleepy clouds of uncertainty, we should slow down and look carefully. Watch out for the deer that might run across the road. Keep your eyes open for the seals playing in the rainy surf. If we pay attention to the sleepy clouds, we just might catch a glimpse of God's awesomeness.

3—BLESSED ASSURANCE

Dazzling glory and sleepy clouds aren't the only way to experience our awesome God, however. In this Transfiguration story, God's awesomeness is also felt in blessed assurance. Jesus and the disciples didn't go up on that mountain just so the disciples could witness what happened to Jesus. They went up there to pray. Jesus needed direction from God about what he should do next. The entire chapter of Luke 9 is moving quickly in the direction of Jerusalem and the fact that Jesus will suffer and die there. In this chapter, Jesus is calling his disciples to practice the ministry that they will carry on after he's gone from them. Jesus is asking them to deny themselves, to take up their own crosses, and to give their lives for this proclamation of God's kingdom. Luke chapter nine is a time of decision for Jesus, the disciples, and many other would-be followers. Will they have the spiritual strength to go through with this journey to the cross? Will they have the blessed assurance that they truly are doing the will of God?

The beauty of the Transfiguration story is that God answers this prayer for Jesus, Peter, John, and James. I don't mean that they won't have any further doubts and struggles. They certainly do! But this transfiguration of Jesus was a critical infusion of confidence for all of them. The presence of Moses and Elijah indicated that Jesus was endorsed by the authority of the law and the prophets. And to that was added God's awesome voice from the cloud. When God said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!", Jesus and his disciples received a blessed assurance that what had begun at the time of Jesus'

baptism was still in effect. Jesus was still headed in the right direction, with God's full approval. The disciples should keep following his lead and obeying his word.

As Steve and I were driving back along the highway in Oregon, we noted that the snowplows had concentrated less on clearing the driving lanes, and more on making sure the white lines on the sides of the road were visible. We decided that the plow drivers must have wanted to make sure no one drove off the edge of the highway. Likewise, when we're dazzled by bright light or confused and frightened by the fog of uncertainty, we're grounded, stabilized, and centered by the confidence that what Jesus has taught us is correct. If we keep our focus on Jesus, he will guide us well. He will make sure we arrive safely at home. Our awesome God offers us blessed assurance.

CONCLUSION

I told you that Steve and I visited his mother. Cordelia is 96 years old, and she lives in an assisted living residence. Quite a bit of her conversation was about the fact that her health is in decline and she doesn't expect to live a lot longer. Her heart is strong, and—as far as we know—she could live a few more years. But, as we were saying goodbye, Cordelia pointed out the reality that we might not ever see her again in this life. We might only see each other again in heaven. There's a sadness in that kind of conversation. But there's a beautiful comfort in it too. Our awesome God has a dazzling glory set out for us. There are some sleepy clouds between here and there, so we can't comprehend all that mystery. But, if we keep listening to Jesus, he will guide us in the right direction. We are truly blessed to have an awesome God of assurance.